



Reflections from a Desk Chair Activist: On Translating the Printemps Érablé

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OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF “CASSEROLES” *textes qui bougent au rythme du carré rouge*

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Reflections from a Desk Chair Activist: *On Translating the Printemps Érablé*

Anna from Translating the Printemps Érablé

I woke up on May 19th, the morning after Bill 78 passed, feeling angry and powerless. While I have been a supporter of the student strike from the beginning, I had not gotten personally involved in the protests until that morning, for a variety of not very good reasons. I live at the edge of the Quartier Latin in Montreal, which has been ground zero for much of the violence that has happened, mostly at the hands of the police, and where I was literally afraid of going to the dépanneur at night, for fear of emerging to find myself trapped in a police kettle. And at the same time the government was telling them; me; us; that we no longer had the right to freely protest.

My partner and I subscribe to the Saturday edition of *Le Devoir*, and that morning we were buoyed to read their excellent, thorough, and uncompromising [denouncement of Bill 78](#), on behalf of their entire editorial staff. Quebec would fight this, we thought. Then I turned on my computer, and saw friends linking to the [Globe and Mail's official editorial on the topic](#), which mounted a shameful defense of the law, and histrionically announced to the world that, "The students and their leaders have behaved outrageously. Only all-out victory will satisfy them. Thus, they are not partners for negotiations. They demand their constitutional rights be protected, as if their rights were absolute...". This was not what I was seeing on the street outside my window every night. Like any bilingual Montrealer, I have always been aware of the enormous disparity between French and English media in this province, but these two editorials, side by side, were the straw that broke the camel's back.

Translating the printemps érable (www.quebecprotest.com) came out this anger. That same Saturday morning, my partner and I contacted some friends with the idea to translate good French-language media into English, in an attempt to balance the *Globe and Mail's*, the *National Post's*, the *Gazette's*, the *Macleans'*, and yes, even the *CBC's* of the world. Everybody jumped on board immediately. Within hours of the site going live, our translations (and our very first was that same *Le Devoir* editorial) were being enthusiastically distributed, and people I had never met were emailing me offering to help. Some of them said that they had been about to start their very own blogs doing the exact same thing when they found ours. There had clearly been a collective moment of shock at what the English media was publishing, and many of us had the same realization that perhaps translation was part of the answer. And so the site exploded within days. To date, two weeks after its launch, we have had

almost 40 000 unique visitors from 131 countries around the world. We publish translations of everything valuable we can get our hands on: news articles, editorials, videos, memes, documents such as press releases, open letters and manifestos. We very occasionally editorialize (only three times to date, always addressing the issue of media coverage.) We want people to be able to see what is happening for themselves.

We jokingly call ourselves "desk chair activists". In the days immediately following the passing of Bill 78, many of us were too scared to go out and protest; peaceful marches would turn ugly quickly and arbitrarily as soon as a line of riot cops would decide to charge. We sent each other emails during those first few days, expressing how good it felt to be doing something, even if it was from the comfort of our homes. It helped alleviate our feelings of powerlessness. We were providing a service. Readers responded with incredible support and love; the project clearly resonated. These days, since the police have stopped charging at peaceful protesters every night (at least in Montreal; let me be clear that in Quebec City this is still happening), most of us do go out every evening with our casseroles. But we then come home and work on a translation, hoping to represent what we are seeing on the street for those who cannot be here with us.

What I think is significant about this project is the way in which it has served as a sort of microcosm of the larger student movement. We operate as a collective, and decisions are largely made by the group of translators who contribute the most regularly. I try to keep my role mostly to that of an administrator. There are about 10 of us who are working on this most days, some of whom are friends, and some of whom are people who volunteered to help out initially as strangers, but have now become friends. In addition to that, every day people submit things anonymously through tumblr, email me to help out here and there, or otherwise offer their services. While some ask me for suggestions about what to translate, many get in touch saying, "I want to translate this, is it taken?" such that the blog is as much a curation project as a translation one; we are collectively sharing the media that we together have identified as significant and true. I have posted pieces that I personally disagree with--ones that are more centrist than I identify with, for example--but that is the beauty of this project and of this movement. We are avoiding factionalism as much as we can. We feel a huge sense of solidarity. There are so many of us, and we come from everywhere, politically, demographically, ideologically, etc. This is not just middle class students. The blog reflects that reality as does the movement.

The last aspect of the blog that speaks to the dynamics of this movement is that of kindness, generosity and a tremendous collaborative spirit. People don't just donate their time to do translations. Every day, people also email me corrections (thereby keeping the quality of our work up), encouragement and words of thanks, and often other advice. A web designer got in touch and said that while he wasn't up for translating, he could offer some free web advice, which we gladly accepted, and he

even donated our URL – www.quebecprotest.com – to us. There has been such an outpouring of love and support, of strangers being generous with strangers, that it has moved me to tears on several occasions. That is also what I see out in the streets every night (and I talked about how underreported this beauty is [here](#)). And that is a real space of hope in all of this; while the reactionaries talk about us not being "serious" enough, we are, together, re-imagining what we want our communities to look like and feel like. We are remembering that we want to live in a place where we laugh with, cry with, scream with, dance with, and take care of our neighbours. That is what living in a democracy should be, and that is what we are modeling for the world right now, because our leaders aren't. It is enormous, and I am glad to be a part of it.